

## Understanding cities

A brief history of CAMOC, an international committee about cities



The Huangpu River in Shanghai, a city with a population of over 25 million

Ian Jones

## Introduction

**Covid 19 will not reverse urbanisation. The primal drive to congregate in cities and towns in pursuit of aspirations and a better life will continue.**

Written by Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Under Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Habitat, and quoted in The Value of Sustainable Urbanisation, World Cities Report 2020, UN Habitat New York 2020



In 2005, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) agreed that an international committee could be formed to represent museums about cities. It would be ICOM's 30<sup>th</sup> international committee. It was a provisional agreement and the committee was given three years to demonstrate that it was fulfilling a need and would be a viable proposition.

The committee was given the acronym CAMOC, the Collections and Activities of Museums of Cities. What follows is an account of this committee, its work and its aspirations. It is not exactly an exciting read and much might seem tedious, but we do need a record of how CAMOC started and why. It is written from the personal perspective of one of the founders, but it has been checked out with colleagues to provide as much veracity as can be humanly possible. It is a continuing project and will be updated at regular intervals as we progress.

We are an organisation like any other, not perfect. We have our virtues and our failings, but at least we have tried to make our contribution, however modest, to the life of cities: to help make cities better places in which to live. That's the ultimate reason for our existence. But firstly a few words about our artefact: cities, where most of the world now lives, in wealth or in poverty, in war or in peace.

Ian Jones  
London August 2021

## Cities

Cities do not merely symbolise the dreams, aspirations and hopes of individuals and communities, they are the primary catalysts or drivers of economic development and prosperity across the world.

The Value of Sustainable Urbanisation, World Cities Report 2020, UN Habitat New York 2020



Sous les pavés, la plage In the old "European" quarter of Shanghai, looking over to Pudong, the financial centre

Sous les pavés la plage - under the paving, there's the beach. It was one of the memorable slogans in the Paris of May 1968. It suggests the possibility that there may be a better life under those paving stones. The city may be dirty, polluted, riddled with slums, even violent, but it's where the jobs are, the bright lights, where things happen, where students revolt and where power lies. Is that what attracts people year after year from rural China to Shanghai, the city in our photo on the cover and in the photo above? It's the same across the world: cities act like magnets.

People in cities may just go about their business, just live their lives, no more than that, or together they may construct buildings, create monuments, or plot revolutions or simply riot, do things they could not do isolated, and without cities, without concentrations of people there would be none of the countryside we enjoy in so many countries, no wilderness, no emptiness, and little of the civilisation, for good or ill, we have experienced for centuries. Of course, we cannot guarantee that the city, especially the big city, will always be a magnet. Still, there is little evidence, so far, that the city, big or small, will lose its attraction, even in a pandemic.



Slums are a depressing feature of so many cities





Not all cities are agreeable places in which to live



Small towns like this one, Blaenau Ffestiniog, a former slate quarrying town in Wales, may be unknown to the rest of the world, they may have no status, no iconic monuments, but they are where so many of us live. They should not be ignored. They too matter.

Sometime in the next year or two, a woman will give birth in the Lagos slum of Ajegunle, a young man will flee his village in west Java for the bright lights of Jakarta, or a farmer will move his impoverished family into one of Lima's innumerable *pueblos jóvenes*. The exact event is unimportant and it will pass entirely unnoticed. Nonetheless it will constitute a watershed in human history, comparable to the Neolithic or Industrial revolutions. For the first time the urban population of the earth will outnumber the rural.

Planet of Slums, Mike Davis, Verso, London and New York 2007

It gets repeated endlessly to the point of cliché: we live in the urban age. Clichés are liable to be true, and, yes, cities, big or small, are where most of us now live. More than a third of Uruguayans live in Montevideo, more than a third of Argentinians live in Buenos Aires. Dhaka, Kinshasa and Lagos are at least 40 times larger than they were in 1950. Cities can die like Palmyra, or come back to live another quite different life. Detroit is one example. Once a centre of the car industry, the city filed for bankruptcy in 2013. In 2015 it became UNESCO's City of Design and a tourist destination. From near death to a more healthy life, for a whole string of reasons, which perhaps a museum about the city can help us understand.

Many of the great policy issues of our age, from tackling climate change to promoting social equality, are being led at city, rather than national, level.

World Cities Cultural Forum [www.worldcitiescultureforum.com](http://www.worldcitiescultureforum.com)

The forum represents 38 cities across the world, from Bogota to Helsinki. For good or ill, they set the agenda, even if in so many cases they suck the blood out of their hinterland.

But what exactly is the city? Where does it begin, where does it end? For example, what, or where, is Paris? What the world calls Paris is a relatively small city, with just over two million people and with a Mayor whose authority extends only to its 20 arrondissements. But there's a bigger city, the Métropole du Grand Paris which is Paris plus its suburbs where most people, seven million of them, live. Then beyond the Métropole there's the île de France, one vast urban area with around 12 million people, stretching out from Notre Dame and the Arc de Triomphe. Is all that Paris? At what geographical point do you call yourself a Parisian? The centre of London is vastly outstripped by endless suburbs, without which there would be no centre and no iconic buildings. Are you a Londoner if you live in one of those endless suburbs which no tourist visits?

Where does the city end? After all, it has to stop somewhere, somewhere that is no longer called the city, where steel, glass and concrete finally give way to green fields. It's not simple though. Rio, for example, seems like a series of cities separated by mountains and forests. Shanghai is built up more or less all the way to Tongli, one of the old silk towns in the Yangtze basin. Is it still Shanghai out there, or is Marne la Vallée Paris? If not, why not? It's a problem, as we can see below, even for the UN:

Most people can agree that cities are places where large numbers of people live and work; they are hubs of government, commerce and transportation. But how best to define the geographical limits of a city is a matter of some debate. So far, no standardised international criteria exist for determining the boundaries of a city and often multiple boundary definitions are available for any given city.

*The World's Cities in 2018—Data Booklet* (ST/ESA/ SER.A/417). United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2018.

The UN uses a combination of measures to estimate city size. In 2018, it calculated that there were 548 cities with a population of at least one million. 33 were megacities, that is, cities with 10 million or more inhabitants. Of these 27 were located in the less developed regions of the world. Urban growth is fastest in Africa and Asia. Lagos, for example, had a population of around 14m in 2016, but has a projected population of 24m by 2030. London and Paris both feature as megacities. Yet administrative London, the Mayor's city, has a population rather less at around 8.9m – we have to say 'around' as that figure seems to fluctuate from week to week as people move in and out to live or work, and that's true of just about every city on the planet.

But then, where does it start to become a city? This is what Eurostat ([www.ec.europa.eu](http://www.ec.europa.eu)), the body which provides statistical information to the European Union, has to say: *"A city is a local administrative unit (LAU) where the majority of the population lives in an urban centre of at least 50,000 inhabitants."* To which there can only be one response – why 50,000? If you are on, or above that figure you are a city, but below that you are not? Is there a cut off point below which a place is not a city and therefore not worthy of consideration? As to that question, see our quote by Spiro Kostof below.

You could say that the city is the administrative area run by the Mayor, which, in the case of Paris and so many cities, is rather small. Or you could say the city's boundary, as we mentioned earlier, is where the green fields start – rather difficult in the case of Rio, which has a large forest right in the middle. Or the city could be not just the suburbs, but the wider metropolitan area, the area far beyond the steel, glass and concrete and even the green fields, where people live, though they work in the city centre – the travel to work area. The city could be even wider if the city is considered to be the area or region dominated by the centre: the city's area of influence in other words.

There are wide metropolitan areas which in effect are clusters of cities and towns. Two in Europe stand out: Randstand in the Netherlands, which is made up of the inter-connected cities of Rotterdam, Amsterdam, the Hague, and Utrecht, and the smaller towns and urban areas between these distinctive cities. In Germany there is the vast Rhein-Ruhr complex, including Cologne, Essen and Dortmund. From space at night it looks like one vast urban area, which is what it is.

It's clearly not straightforward and the best guides, at least to the hard facts, are undoubtedly the UN's *The World's Cities in 2018* and the UN's *Revision of the World Urbanisation Prospects 2018*. (the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, DESA). Both publications are essential reading for anyone interested in cities and urban living. See also the *World Cities Report 2020: The Value of Sustainable Urbanisation*, published by UN Habitat. Also. The UN's *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020*.

*Demographia World Urban Areas 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Edition* June 2021 is a first class and readable guide to city demographics. Then there is *Cities in Europe, The New OECD-EC Definition*, (Lewis Dijkstra and Hugo Poelman, Brussels 01/2012). It is one of a series of short papers produced by the EU's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy. They have highlighted some of the problems of definition.

Each country has its own method of defining a city based on a wide range of criteria. These often include population size and density, but also more functional or historic criteria such as having urban functions, being a recipient of national urban policy funds or having received city rights through a charter sometime between the Middle Ages and today. For example, in the UK city status is conferred by the powerless monarch and has been since 16th century when the monarch had power. This does lead to some unusual cities, such as St David's in Wales with less than 2,000 inhabitants.

Again, in 2012 the OECD produced *Refining Urban: a new way to measure metropolitan areas*. It is available on-line or in paperback. (OECD, Paris 14/05/2012).

In the end, it might be better to say that we know a big city, or a small one, when we experience it at first hand, and it's rather easy to see that São Paulo is some way bigger than, say, Stockholm or Auckland. Just fly over, it's like flying over a completely urban Wales.

Of course we can ask, what is the point of all this? Why does it matter that Seoul or Lagos are megacities? Or that Kyoto or Cape Town are rather small in comparison? Statistics, as the UN points out, have meaning. Understanding trends in urbanisation is crucial to the implementation of the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development. Understanding, and communicating, is what a museum about a city can be good at, and it does not matter whether a city is big or small, famous or obscure.

Consider two words: Moscow and Washington. We can use them to describe a political position, to refer to power, to be a substitute for Russia or the US. They are loaded with meaning, and the city assumes something else, something intangible. Venice, Rio, Marrakesh, Samarkand: they all have an aura about them. Words have the meanings we give them.





Politics of the street, during the CAMOC and ICOM triennial conference in Milan in 2016

When we say Beijing or Rio, are we referring to those places that we all know about like Tiananmen Square, or Copacabana? What about the suburbs where most people actually live and work, in poverty or in wealth? Is Rome still Rome in the summer if tourists double the population of the iconic city centre? In summer, the citizens of Lisbon seem to have handed the city over to visitors. And do tourists, the passing visitors, see the city in the same way as the locals, the ones who live there year in year out? That's unlikely: living and visiting are not quite the same thing.

There are locals who would not dream of going to the Eiffel Tower or Istanbul's Hagia Sophia, or New York's Empire State Building – those iconic bits are best left to the tourists (perhaps not now the Hagia Sophia which has had its museum status revoked and been turned into a mosque). Perhaps they are just the city's face to the world, though the face can be very beautiful and can make visiting an intense pleasure. Living, too, in a beautiful city, or near to its iconic centre can be enhancing, unless of course you are living in a slum and can only see the good bits in the distance, as seeing Copacabana from a Rio favela.

And of rather direct relevance to CAMOC and ICOM, we have conferences in Kyoto rather than Tokyo, or Krakow rather than Nowa Huta nearby, once the home of the great and polluting Lenin steelworks. The reasons are clear and can easily be defended, but it's worth remembering that the vast majority of us across the world live in ordinary suburbs, un-iconic cities, or in slums.

As a corrective to those words we throw around like London or Rio, New York or Sydney with its great opera house, it's worth reading Mike Davis's Planet of Slums we quoted above. In some countries most of the urban population live in slums, that is in areas of great poverty, with poor sanitation, little public transport, high crime rates and very basic health provision. The number of slum dwellers in some countries, such as Ethiopia or Chad or Nepal is almost the total population. Even in the developed West cities have their poor, deprived areas where people live because they cannot afford to live anywhere else. Poverty though can be a relative term. And of course people live, or try to, in Kabul or Kandahar.

Then there are those places that once flourished, but now languish in the rust belt – places built around steel works, factories or coal mines, now long gone: places where their original

purpose no longer exists. We should not forget that people still live in them. Some can be re-invented like Detroit, others simple cannot. They just quietly fade away.



Revolting cities



A mix of politics and troubled history on a wall poster in Dublin. Note the quote from James Joyce: *History: the nightmare from which I am trying to awake*

Maybe it's just a matter simply of language. For example the French ville and the English city do not have quite the same meaning, just as the French musée includes what in English would be an art gallery. The same goes for a string of other languages. The French used to make the distinction between ville and cité, the cité being a special sort of place, an idea even, set up against the reality of the ville. Ville now can mean just about any place, big or small, apart from village, or hameau, which is very small.

In English, city normally refers to a large place, though large is undefined. A town, in common usage, is something smaller. Yet, one city, so-called, in Wales, St David's has a population the size of a village, as we saw earlier. Город/Gorod in Russian can mean just about any sort of place where people live, apart from derevnya, a village. Then phrases like: on the town, downtown and so on. Let's just stick to 'city' for our purposes – a human habitation of whatever size.

Perhaps rather than size, words and feelings better describe what a city is, though that too has a few problems.





The Brandenburg Gate, one of the great symbols of Berlin...



But this is Berlin too, the one where people live and work

76,600 people work at Heathrow airport, London, which describes itself as a small city. Why not? It has shops of all types, places of worship, you can eat there any time of day and night, and sleep there. Schiphol airport in the Netherlands has its own library and its own little museum or at least some items from the Rijksmuseum in nearby Amsterdam and from NEMO, Amsterdam's Science Museum. And what about Silicon Valley? Yet, people do not exactly live in airports and Silicon Valley is more of an idea than place – and none has what you could call a soul.

There can at least be one conclusion: cities matter. We live and work in them, we die in them, we visit them, we walk their streets, go to their museums, their galleries, their gigs, we eat in their restaurants and drink in their bars. We don't need anyone to tell us what a city is. Like a museum, we know it when we see it.

So maybe, if you call yourself a Carioca, or a Parisian, or a Muscovite, even if you live outside the city walls, that's enough, and attempting to define a city may be rather pointless. Yet, some have tried, and a few have managed to provide, not so much definitions as comments, insights and ideas. Here are a few quotes which might help us better understand the city:

What is the city, but the people?  
Shakespeare, Coriolanus Act 3, scene 1

Une ville sans mur n'est pas une ville

J-F Sobry, quoted in Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped, Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History*, Thames&Hudson, London 1991

Cities are places where a certain energised crowding of people takes place. This has nothing to do with absolute size or with absolute numbers: it has to do with settlement density... Cities are places that have some physical circumscription, whether material or symbolic, to separate those who belong to the urban order from those who do not.

Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped, Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History*, Thames&Hudson, London 1991



Istanbul, one of the great cities of the world. More than 15 million inhabitants live here, around 19% of Turkey's population. An example of Spiro Kostof's energised crowding of people.

[A city is a] point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community.

Lewis Mumford, *The City in History, its Origins, its Transformations and its Prospects*, Harcourt Brace and World, New York 1961

'City' is a word to describe almost anything...If anywhere can be defined as a city, then the definition runs the risk of meaning nothing. A city is made by its people, within the bounds of the possibilities it can offer them...it has a distinctive identity that makes it much more than an agglomeration of buildings...a city can be defined by how close together its people gather to live and work, by its system of government, by its transport infrastructure and by the functioning of its sewers...One definition of a city is that it is a wealth-creating machine that can, at the minimum, make the poor not quite as poor as they were...A real city offers its citizens the freedom to be what they want to be. Dayan Sudjic, *The Language of Cities*, Penguin Random House, London 2016

Each city has its own particular location, each occupies a particular niche in time. Each city has a name which conjures up qualities often impossible to define.

Emrys Jones, *Metropolis*, OPUS, Oxford 1990

Urban sprawl along the northeast coast, between Washington and Boston is turning that part of the country into one huge megalopolis...Such formless growth dismays people who love both city and country and feel the need to maintain some balance and distinction between the two...Traditional cities – however they vary from one country to another – have certain features in common. One of them is density.

Emrys Jones and Eleanor van Zandt, *The City Yesterday Today and Tomorrow*, Aldus Books, London 1974

The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, Vintage Books, London 1997

How many of these writers, how many of us, just a few years ago would have foreseen a technology which has changed so much: in advanced countries you only need a mobile phone to shop online – no need to go to the city supermarket. You can see great paintings online without going to an art gallery. Do you need to go into your office in the city any more



if you can work from anywhere online? Will cities become pointless or change beyond recognition? We just don't know – so let's leave that one for the time being.



Kabul under Taliban rule, August 2021. A workman painting over the faces of women on a shop front.  
© Lotfullah Najafizada. Reproduced in Figaro, Paris 15 August 2021

Then, something happened suddenly, something very much unforeseen by most of us: Covid 19. In a matter of months it too has changed the way we live in cities, the way we travel, the way we work, the way we relate to each other on the street, the restrictions imposed on our daily lives. Will we go back to what life was like before? Again, we don't know.

We can at least describe the city as an artefact and inevitably, artefacts have a habit of ending up in museums and, equally inevitably, there are museums which specialise in this the greatest of all artefacts. That leads us to our next chapter.

But before we go, a few words from UN Habitat:

Urbanisation should not be at the expense of rural development. In fact both should be symbiotic and mutually enhancing.

Quoted in The Value of Sustainable Urbanisation, World Cities Report 2020, UN Habitat New York 2020.

We're all about cities, but let's not forget that almost half the world's population does not live in cities, large or small, but rather in small rural villages, or nowhere in particular, places you couldn't even find on the map. Afghanistan for example is overwhelmingly rural, one of the least urbanised countries in the world. Those people out there away from the big cities, they too matter.

People also matter who live in poverty or in fear of conflict and violence, and it does not matter to them where they live, in a village or in a city.



## Museums about cities

But why should we have museums about these artefacts in which we live, work and die? Here's one reason:

If museums of cities did not already exist, they might now need to be invented to help understand and negotiate urban change

Duncan Grewcock, Museum International, UNESCO September 1996

That perhaps points to a new sort of museum about a city, different from the one that used to be so common across the world. Here's another quote in the same direction from the former Director of the Museum of London, who writes from the practical experience of running a large museum about a great and complex city:

City museums, by applying their special skills, have much to say that is relevant to modern society. Museums about cities need to interpret and explain urban society and the processes of change at work within it.

Max Hebditch, Museum International, UNESCO July-September 1995

And then these lyrical words:

The best city museums act as a starting point for the discovery of the city, which can lead people to look with fresh, more informed and tolerant eyes at the richness of the present urban environment and to imagine beyond it to past and possible future histories.

Nicola Johnson, Museum International, UNESCO July-September 1995

Those quotes, those words like 'understand', 'negociate', 'interpret', 'explain' and a phrase like 'possible future histories' suggest changing attitudes in museums about cities, so many of which were, and still are, guardians of the city's glittering history and its treasures. Splendid places, but changing attitudes eventually led to a new, different sort of museum, and to the creation of CAMOC, one of the international committees of ICOM as a forum for the exchange of ideas and practice on how best to represent the city, big or small, in all its aspects, its slums, its suburbs, it's urban sprawl, its past, its present and, yes, its possible future.



Street art about an unsustainable city in an unsustainable world

## ICOM

Before we get on to CAMOC, let's start with our parent organisation. Since 1946, following the aftermath of war, the International Council of Museums (ICOM), an organisation independent of government control and based in Paris has represented museums, the people who work in them, and the contribution they make to society.

An American, Chauncey J Hamlin was, among many other things, including fighting in Verdun in the First World War, President of the Trustees of the Science Museum in Buffalo, USA. To quote his own words; "In 1945, when I met Georges Salles, then director of French Museums, I suggested to him that we set up an International Council of Museums. He was immediately enthusiastic and agreed to sign a circular inviting the world's most eminent museologists to an international meeting in the Louvre in November 1946."

He became President from 1946 to 1953 and was succeeded by his friend Georges Salles who served till 1958. (From biographies written by Sid Ahmed Baghli)

Early meetings were held in the Louvre in Paris with offices on the avenue Kléber. Now annual meetings are held in the UNESCO building, with offices in different parts of Paris. ICOM has become infinitely larger and does far more, but that original ethos has not changed. Its members represent just about every museum activity. It publishes a 'Red List' to fight illegal trafficking of artefacts, it publishes a code of ethics, it is one of the four founders of the Blue Shield (which aims to protect the world's heritage from conflict or natural disasters). It is an active global organisation and a force for the good, and for that reason, if none other, it has formal relations with UNESCO and a consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and has an active relationship with a string of other international organisations. ICOM matters, it does things, it makes a difference, and is therefore, at the very least, an organisation worth joining.



Urban life can be hard for so many. Tongli on the Yangtze basin, China, a small town CAMOC visited in 2010

## The steps towards CAMOC, an international committee for museums about cities

...those city museums that have been established in recent years and that do not yet experience the weight of rich collections...are free to respond essentially to the contemporary city and to the assumed needs of its citizens.  
Nichola Johnson in Museum International, UNESCO July-September 1995



Blaž Peršin, City Museum of Ljubljana

*Musée de ville...Les mots sont jetés sur le papier. Liée dès sa création à l'idée de réseau de musées, l'expression fait alors son entrée dans un espace public donné, celui de la communauté museale...Mobilisée d'abord dans un cadre strictement informel, cette notion se voit progressivement diffusée par des instances reconnues sur le plan muséologique...Consécration suprême, la constitution en 2005 du CAMOC...*

Le Musée de Ville, Histoire et Actualités, Jean-Louis Postula, La Documentation Française, Paris 2015.

Where do ideas come from? Who was the first to think of it? Who was the first to make the idea real. ICOM can be traced back to one individual who, with a colleague and friend, put an idea into practice. That's pretty clear, but in the case of a new form of city museum it's best to say that it was an idea whose time had come, and many people in different countries and different museums reached a similar conclusion. It led almost inevitably to the creation of CAMOC as ICOM's 30<sup>th</sup> international committee in Moscow in April 2005. Why ICOM? Many of us realised that the formal stamp of approval from ICOM opened up opportunities difficult to achieve otherwise.

CAMOC is the acronym given to our committee by ICOM: the Collections and Activities of Museums of Cities. Not exactly an exciting title, but why have a museum about our artefact anyway? If you visit a city, is a museum about it your first port of call? After all, you are in the artefact, it is all around you. In fact you are part of it and without you there would be no city. Do you need an explanation, a guide? If you do, then there any number of beautifully produced guides (aimed at tourists), which tell you all about the city's history, what to do, where to go. This suggests that the tourist should not necessarily be the museum's main audience. That audience might be the local one, the citizens of the city. Citizens might not be just an audience either. They could be active players, certainly if the museum is not just a museum of city history, but a museum about the city today and even about the possible city of tomorrow. They, people of the city, after all, continue to shape and re-shape the



museum's artefact. Not only that, they live in it. And they have a vested interest in the city today and tomorrow.

All that may be true, but the question remains – why? Is a museum about a city necessary? Can it make a positive difference to the city and to urban living. Should it? As Karl Marx once said, “Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point however is to change it”. Museums interpret the world or bear witness to the world around them, but is changing the world best left to others more qualified? If that is so, then can a museum about a city, the world immediately around it, offer anything beyond what other agents in the field can offer, like urban centres such as the Arsenal in Paris or university departments of urban studies? What about social workers? Or above all, city governments? Does collecting rubbish in the streets contribute more to the happiness of citizens than a museum about the city? After all, Jacques Chirac, when he was Mayor of Paris made a lot of people happy by keeping the streets clean and getting the metro to function like clockwork. In short, does our museum have a niche and can it make its own positive contribution to urban living and the betterment of the human condition?

Let's not dwell too much on the history of museums, when they were created, by and for whom. The literature on that is vast, and we hardly need to add to it. Let's concentrate on museums about a city, about urban life. They too have a long history, though the museum exclusively about the city, as we can see, is a relatively recent development.

Where do we begin? Where was the first museum about a city? Paris's Carnavalet? The History Museum of Frankfurt, the Museum of London, the History Museum of Chicago founded in 1856? Then those historical societies so common in the USA? The New York Historical Society, for example, was founded as far back as 1804. Or a museum outside Europe or North America, in Africa or Asia, regions of the world we so often have wrongly neglected? All have claims.



Urban decay is an inescapable subject for a museum about a city.

A detailed examination of their history is set out in what is unquestionably the standard work on the subject: *Le Musée de Ville, Histoire et Actualités* by Jean-Louis Postula (La Documentation Française, Paris 2015). Its bibliography is definitive at the date of publication, and it illustrates the growing literature on what has been a specialist subject. For anyone interested it's essential reading. As to individuals who have contributed to the development of city museums, the list is almost too long to mention.

City museums, by tradition, have been guardians of city treasures, treasures which do not necessarily relate to the city, but which were acquired by wealthy merchants perhaps, or entrepreneurs of one sort or another. Many were, and still are in splendid 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings, reflecting civic pride, and showing off the taste of a wealthy merchant or industrialist. They have been, in essence, museums of city history or of the collecting habits of wealthy individuals. They were eclectic. Many had, and still have, great art collections. In many, the city itself was (and still is in so many museums) relegated to a section or a floor. Overwhelmingly, they dealt with city history. The present and especially the future were

foreign countries rarely to be visited. They still exist, many still flourish and they can be good, even outstanding. Why not?

In the 1990's change clearly was in the air. The idea that these specialised museums could have another dimension and reflect the living city around them gradually took shape, though it is inconceivable that no-one had thought of it before. In fact, at least one person had. Jean-Louis Postula mentions the New York architect John V. Van Pelt, a trustee of the Museum of the City of New York. In 1931 an article by him was published in *The Museum News*, the journal of the American Association of Museums. It was based on an address he gave in Pittsburgh entitled *The museum as a guide to the life of the city*. We can accept that title now as a pretty good blueprint for museums about a city..

UNESCO's Museum International published an edition in 1995 devoted largely to city museums (No 3 July – September 1995). To quote the editorial: "And yet cities continue to act as powerful magnets, drawing rich and poor from near and far, into an increasingly polyglot, variegated and ever shifting mix of cultures, customs and expectations...City museums are part and parcel of this volatile urban landscape and, as the articles in this dossier reveal, they are striving to come to terms with their new mandate and new publics. The museum that speaks of the city must now speak to the city."

The edition contained a number of memorable articles which reflected changing attitudes and set the scene for a new generation of city museums: *Discovering the City* by Nichola Johnson, then Director of Museology at the University of East Anglia in England; *Museums about Cities* by Max Hebditch, Director of the Museum of London - "To be the museum about the city it is first necessary to define the city". If there really was a new city museums movement these two articles could be said to encapsulate its rationale. Then: *History, Ideology and Politics in the Historical Museum of Warsaw* by Beata Meller; *The Imaginary City* by Brigitte Scenczt; *The city is the museum !* by Anne Marie Collins...and so on. These thoughts, these ideas ultimately led to CAMOC.

Two years earlier in 1993 a meeting of city museums entitled *Reflecting Cities*, took place at the Museum of London, perhaps the first of its kind to examine the work of a museum about a city. For that initiative we have to single out Max Hebditch. Jean-Louis Postula mentions a 1992 edition of ICOM's *ICOM News* in which Max set out a Museum of London proposal to create an international association of city museums, a forum for those who had an interest in the past, present and future of the city. Max had anticipated CAMOC's mission statement more than ten years before. The International Association of City Museums (IACM), to give it its full title, was set up and, went on to meet in Barcelona in 1995 and in Luxembourg in 2000.

At the ICOM triennial conference in Barcelona in 2001 a number of people got together to propose setting up an ICOM international committee for city museums and a working group was created, led by Galina Vedernikova then Director General of Moscow City Museum.

At this point, you could ask, why an ICOM committee? Why not stick with the International Association of City Museums for example? The answer to that was straightforward: the imprint of ICOM, as an internationally recognised organisation with a long history and with a special relationship with UNESCO was needed. It would give credibility and not only that, ICOM could provide the logistic and other support to get an international committee off the ground and grow substantially which an independent committee or association could find difficult.

The working group held meetings and various city museum directors were invited to attend. The necessary support was gathered and the proposal to create a new international committee was approved at the ICOM triennial meeting in Seoul in October 2004. The proposal was pushed through by Galina Vedernikova.

In summary, a number of people, together or independently, were involved in forming an organisation to represent city museums – that is, museums concerned exclusively with their own city, and, in so many cases, museums which were concerned not only with the city's past, but also its present and future.

The International Association of City Museums went on to meet again in Amsterdam in 2005 after CAMOC was set up. That meeting was particularly memorable in encapsulating the prevailing mood. The conference, *City Museums as Centres of Civic Dialogue?* was organised by the Association, the Amsterdam Historical Museum and ICMAH, ICOM's international committee for museums and collections of archaeology and history. A number of us from CAMOC went along and took part, if only to learn, which we did: it helped to set out a path for us. One presentation by Carla Maldini was especially memorable - trying to set up a museum in war-torn Beirut.

A month later, in December 2005, after CAMOC had got off the ground, a conference took place in Rome: *I Musei Della Città*. It was organised by Carlo M. Traviani of Rome Three University, and held in spectacular surroundings: the Palazzo dei Conservatori on the Capitoline Hill. We were surrounded by Old Masters whose collective value could have written off Italy's national debt. The themes were similar to those at the Amsterdam meeting. One conclusion: things were happening.



Shanghai 2010, where CAMOC had its first conference in China. Just a few years later that skyline is now quite different, with even more towers, such is the pace of urban change across the world, and not only in China



### An outsider's perspective



Two faces of the same city: Shanghai 2010

As for me, I was a late arrival and an outsider, someone who had never worked in a museum. What got me interested and involved was the Arsenal in Paris. After visiting this urban centre I got caught up with the idea of a new sort of museum, or urban centre, about the city, a place where people could get a better understand of their city's past, how it functions today and how it could function in the future, and a place which would involve its citizens in the shaping of their city. I also came aware of a growing movement aiming to create a new sort of city museum. I was behind the times, a very late arrival.

In the early 2000s I was working with colleagues in a partnership which dealt with building projects in the UK. Most were to do with culture in some form or other, via Government money available from the recently established Lottery Fund. It could be the refurbishment of a theatre, an art gallery, the building of a community centre. The list was wide. In the early 2000s the city council of Cardiff, the capital city of Wales, decided to compete to be the European Capital of Culture for 2008. The winning city is designated by the European Union for one calendar year to hold a series of cultural events with a pan-European dimension. As with the Olympic Games, the benefits to the chosen city can be considerable, not least in investment, regeneration and the increased ability to attract tourists. As part of the bid was a proposal to create a museum about the city. To quote from the bid: [there is] "no attraction informing on the history and achievements of the city itself...Such an attraction would act as an introduction for visitors to Cardiff, illustrating its place in Wales and the world, and develop a sense of place within the local community." In short, Cardiff had nowhere to celebrate itself. In 2002 my colleagues and I were invited to carry out a feasibility study on how this ambition could be achieved. In particular, where should the museum be located, in the city centre where the footfall was greatest or in the redeveloped docklands area where an opera house designed by the architect Zaha Hadid had been proposed? In what sort of building – a new, purpose built one or in an existing building which would be refurbished? What would it look like? And, above all, and most difficult, what should be in it? It was something of a challenge as we all had been to museums of course, but none of us had worked in one, and none of us belonged to ICOM, or in some cases even heard of it.

There was an immediate problem. Cardiff had no history. Yes, of course it had one. It was a Roman settlement once, though that could be said of most places in Wales. On the other hand, it was a village until the mid-nineteenth century when it grew with remarkable speed following on from the industrial revolution to become the world's largest coal exporting port. What it did not have was the sort of history which, say, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow or Edinburgh had. We therefore decided to start with the mid-nineteenth century, which also coincided with the recent birth of photography. But there was a problem. With a limited

history there weren't many city treasures to put in this proposed museum. In fact, there seemed next to nothing. That turned out to be both a drawback and opportunity.

We looked at other city museums in Britain. Most were overwhelmingly museums of city history, at best stopping at the Second World War. There was nothing in them about the city today and tomorrow. On their own terms they were splendid, but they were museums of the city's history. Nothing wrong with that, but they were not about the city now and could be in the future, more about the city as it was. I decided to read the literature. Things seemed to be changing, things were happening. Museum International, then a UNESCO publication, had, as we mention earlier, a number of articles in the mid-nineties about a new sort of city museum and I became aware of developments on the ground, certainly in the rest of Europe: Stockholm, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, London... Then, I discovered the Arsenal in Paris.

Le Pavillon de l'Arsenal at 21 boulevard Morland was set up in 1988. It is owned by the city government and is a centre for information, documentation and exhibits on the planning and architecture of Paris. It traces the development of Paris from its earliest beginnings as a settlement on the banks of the Seine to today's world city. It is about the urban environment: the city's buildings, traffic, getting from A to B, about streets and spaces, not about people as such. Yet, people live and work in this city and effectively it really is about them, and it fulfills so much of current city museum ethos and practice in that its fundamental philosophy is - "it's your city, not ours; we need your involvement." It is a forum for explanation and debate and enables Parisians to get a better understanding of their city and to help improve their quality of life, from transport, to housing, to the environment. Do we need new cycle lanes? Do we ban cars from streets X and Y? Do we need a new Metro line? All this matters to city living.

When I was there in 2002, the City Government deposited the Paris Local Plan for consultation (Most cities of any size have similar forward plans). It was a rare exercise in public participation. Imaginative videos, maps and plans were complemented by folders on each arrondissement of Paris, so that people could see clearly what were the plans proposed for their area. Citizens therefore were actively encouraged to be involved in shaping their own city. That exercise is no longer unique. In 2018 the Museum of Lisbon held an outstanding exhibition on the future of the city. The ethos was the same as that of the Arsenal 16 years previously: it's your city and its future, is, or should be, in your hands. Yes, the Arsenal is 'owned' by the city government but, no matter, it was an object lesson for a city museum.

The Arsenal became the model for Cardiff and we arrived at this definition for the museum's mission:

*Cardiff Alive!* will be the Museum of Cardiff Life, reflecting the social and urban development of the city, with a wide-ranging and imaginatively displayed collection reinforcing the identity of Cardiff. It will be a centre for information, documentation and education, and for debate and discussion on Cardiff, present and future.

In a sense that was forced on us as there was little we could find to put in the museum. There was one solution: we decided that we could build up a collection by inviting local people to send in items to us, via the local press, even if it was no more than a 1950's TV set – and to tell us their stories, their own personal history. And that indeed was what happened when approval for our proposals and for the go ahead for the museum was finally given by the city council. The museum was to be located in a building, a former library, in the city centre. Not the perfect building by any means, but in a great location, opposite the city concert hall and surrounded by shops, bars and restaurants. The Museum finally opened in 2011 as The Cardiff Story. To quote Victoria Rogers from the museum in 2016:

"We've been open for five years, so we're really new, but we were set up to not only explore and celebrate Cardiff's past, but to very much look at how that has created our present, and how we use it then to shape our future. Our galleries explore this using artefacts, paintings,

photographs and film footage from the past, but also very much through people's stories and memories – so it's a real personal insight into the city, its identity, how it's become the Cardiff we know today - and the role we all play in that."

No, Cardiff did not become Culture Capital of Europe – that went to Graz in Austria, but at least it got a museum about itself.

I had become aware that things were happening, and the Arsenal seemed to represent a model for a new sort of city museum that seemed to be emerging. I remembered the OECD. Around that time the OECD (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) along with IMHE (the OECD programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education) ran a series of seminars on various topics. One of them, at the Finnish Cultural Centre in Paris in September 2000, was on university museums. I was one of the organisers though I knew little about university museums at the time. There were people there who knew a lot about these unique museums, one person in particular, Peter Stanbury, then the Advisor on Museums, Collections and Heritage at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. Eloisa Zell, ICOM's membership services officer, came along to talk about what was needed to set up an ICOM international committee to represent these museums. By 2004 UMAC was up and running as an ICOM international committee to represent university museums. That seminar and Peter's enthusiasm and determination showed what could be done. Looking back to that seminar I thought - why not set up an ICOM committee for city museums? After all, ICOM had a string of international committees on different aspects of museum activity. So I somehow managed to join ICOM. I checked with the President of ICOM UK as to what to do next. He referred me to Eloisa. She pointed out that one Galina Vedernikova from Moscow City Museum had already thought of it, and there were other like minded people who had the same thought, well before I did. I then got in touch with her. Galina invited me to join her at the ICOM triennial in Seoul in 2004. I did not go. Galina did and it was in Seoul that CAMOC was given the seal of approval. It was on a provisional three year basis. We had to prove that we were worth supporting by ICOM. Later I discovered that was a serious challenge.

#### **Москва 2- 8 апрель 2005г / Moscow 3 – 8 April 2005**

In April 2005, with snow still on the ground a meeting of the interested parties was held in Moscow. It was organised by the Museum's Deputy Director, Irina Smagina. There was a large attendance, especially from the Russian Federation and the former Soviet republics, including notably Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. These active and committed delegates formed the bulk of our initial membership and CAMOC owes them a considerable debt. ICOM sent two representatives: Eloisa Zell and John Zvereff, the then Secretary General of ICOM (the title Director General was adopted at ICOM's triennial conference in Vienna in 2007).

The aim was to convince ICOM that the proposition was viable and that an international committee about cities could gather sufficient support amongst ICOM members across the world. At the time it seemed a tall order, not least because there were others in the field like the International Association of City Museums we referred to earlier and ICMAH, ICOM's large and well established international committee for museums and collections of archaeology and history which included cities in its wide remit.

The meeting was a success in that it at least cleared the first hurdle: provisional approval by ICOM. We were given the acronym of CAMOC by Eloisa Zell. A Board, was elected and Galina became the Chair and I became the Secretary. The first Rules for the committee were written with the help of Eloisa Zell, whom, when she retired, we made an Honorary Member of CAMOC. The first elected Executive Board was a small one. With the exception of myself they had all been involved with Galina in pushing for an ICOM international committee:



Galina Vedernikova, Russia. Chair. Director, Moscow City Museum  
 Robert Macdonald, USA. Vice Chair, Director Emeritus, New York City Museum  
 Itzak Brenner, Israel. Vice Chair, Director, the Museum of Rishon Lezion, Israel  
 Anthony Voyadzis, Greece. Treasurer. Chair, Board of Trustees, Athens City Museum  
 Darryl McIntyre, Australia. Board Member. Group Director, Public Programmes, Museum of London  
 Joergen Selmer, Denmark. Board Member. Director, Copenhagen City Museum  
 Ian Jones, Wales. Secretary, Partner, Chadwick Jones Associates, London



Moscow April 2005

The Board was hardly representative of the meeting, which was made up of a preponderance of delegates from the Russian Federation. Neither was it representative of the world at large. That would come later.

During our meeting we drafted a mission statement:

“The International Committee will aim to stimulate dialogue and co-operation between museums by supporting and encouraging them in the collection, preservation and presentation of original material relating to the past, present and future of the city, reinforcing the city’s identity and contributing to its development.”

Eloisa also told us that CAMOC should be “distinctive and unique” and in the end I wrote a statement which I thought reflected our discussions, and changing attitudes to interpreting the city:

“CAMOC is about the city and its people—their history, their present and their future. It is a forum for those who work in museums about cities, but also for anyone involved and interested in urban life: historians, urban planners, architects, and citizens, all of whom can exchange knowledge and ideas across national frontiers.”

It was meant to reflect an organisation which was open to ideas from everyone and everywhere and no-one seemed to object. Of course, you have to be a member of ICOM to join one of its international committees, but we needed the input of those who are involved in the city in one way or another. I added some of our original words:

“The aim will be to support and encourage museums in collecting, preserving and presenting original material about the past, present and future of the city, reinforcing the city’s identity and contributing to its development.”

In short, a museum about a city is a unique sort of museum in that it’s about a living artefact, an artefact which can play an active part in its own present and future.

There was though an immediate challenge. We were given three years to prove ourselves. Later, I was walking on the banks of the Moscow River with John Zvereff, when he told me he could not quite see the point of the Committee. I was also coming to a similar conclusion. Where was our niche? How could we fulfill a need, if there was one, and attract sufficient members to make ourselves viable? There was also a more immediate problem: ICMAH and the International Association. Our vice-chair Bob Macdonald, the former Director of the Museum of New York, pointed out that the Association did not have the status conferred by ICOM. True, but ICMAH did. How could we find a niche, a gap, as it were, in the market? We had to find a need, a demand out there, and meet it. We knew it was there, but we had to give it concrete shape.

ICMAH made its opposition to the establishment of CAMOC known, and they had my sympathies. I couldn’t blame them – we were moving in on much of their territory, and could take members from them. A similar argument was made when COMCOL, ICOM’s committee for collections was being set some years afterwards. Later, in June 2005 at the annual ICOM meeting at the UNESCO building in Paris we arranged what might be called a peace treaty with ICMAH and we both agreed to co-operate wherever possible. That first year was difficult, not least because we received no set up grant from ICOM. We had to dig into our own pockets.

At that first ICOM meeting I made a presentation to ICOM’s then committee - International Committees and Affiliated Organisations. Per Rekdal, well known to ICOM members over many years, was the sympathetic and encouraging Chair.

Just about the first thing we had to do was make ourselves known. So we set up a fairly basic web site, hosted in my native Wales. Only the domain name given by ICOM was free, the rest had to be paid for by ourselves. Later, at the end of 2005 we got an award of €3,500 from ICOM to create a more professional site where we were better able to advertise ourselves. The host was in Wales and we could keep it up to date on a daily basis at no extra cost. It became our principal means of communication. Later ICOM produced a template which international committees were encouraged to use, which we did, as it was plain and simple and it worked, and it was free – and with a splendid web master at ICOM.

At the same time we encouraged other forms of publicity, and articles got written about us, including a three page leading article in the Museums Journal, London in October 2005. Members also published published papers on museums of cities in a variety of journals.

As to a niche, we did have one advantage: our artefact was not only the city and its people in history, but the city today and how it could be tomorrow. Our artefact was hands-on, a living object we could walk in, touch, feel. Our concern was, in fact the urban condition in all its complexity.

Then the reality of being an ICOM committee struck. We were told we had to have a conference. In fact, we had to have one every year. Why? Or more precisely, how? We were just a handful of people with no resources. We were on our own. How on earth could we organise a conference?

Before we could even think about a conference we had to think seriously as to how we would manage our finances. We needed a bank account. But where? A group of people who hardly knew each other was not exactly a safe bet for a bank, not after 9/11. At the time, all but three of ICOM’s international committees ran their own bank account. I found

that extraordinary, not least because it could put ICOM in debt, and depending on the legal position, individual members as well. It was a risk not worth taking. In the end, I entered into an agreement with ICOM that they would administer our account for us with BNP Paribas, as they did with those three committees. In practice, what it meant was that no-one could draw out money without the authorisation of ICOM.

### **Boston, 30 April-2 May 2006: Museums of Cities: gateways to understanding urban life**

So, how could we organise the required annual conference, with only a handful of members and no money in the bank? And where? We could not go back to Moscow again, however tempting. It had to be somewhere else, not least because we were an international committee and therefore not tied to one country. Bob Macdonald came up with a solution: the American Association of Museums was celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, so maybe we could latch on to them and they, and ICOM USA, could take us on board. The AAM agreed and we had our first conference at Northeastern University in Boston. For that we owe those two organisations a big debt. It was our first conference, so let's say a little about it without boring our readership to distraction. The conference was organised by Bob Macdonald in conjunction with Anne Emerson, then the Director of the Boston Museum project which aimed to create a museum about the city.



Boston 2006. Byron Rushing of the Massachusetts House of Representatives speaking about time and place in Boston.

We were lucky: we were part of the vast AAM conference, which opened with an AAM/ICOM lunch addressed by Alissandra Cummins, then President of ICOM. It was a pretty good way to start: we were on centre stage. We already had a write-up in the British publication *Museums Journal*; this was a step further. We had 77 delegates from 15 countries, including, apart from the usual ones, interesting places like Guatemala, Mongolia, Tatarstan and Siberia. Almost half were from Russia, understandable as the Russians were a driving force in setting up our committee.

There were three specific themes:

1. Museums of the city as forums for the investigation and discussion of contemporary urban issues;
2. Collecting to reflect a city's diversity;



### 3. The use of new technology in presenting a city's sense of place and identity.

Those first two themes have appeared in various forms in all our subsequent conferences and meetings. They are, in essence, what we are about: the city in all its aspects.



Boston 2016: Byron Rushing, Galina Vedernikova, Bob Macdonald, Irina Smagina

A keynote speech can be a monument to banality. Ours was worth listening to. Robert Archibald, author of *The New Town Square* and President of the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis, spoke about memory and continuity, the loss of a city's uniqueness and sense of community. Urban museums, he said "are special because they are precisely positioned in those places where we make the future." Exactly.

We then had presentations about a museum in western Siberia; one in Kazan; a museum project in São Paulo; place-based education in New York's Lower East Side Tenement Museum...and themes such as "*City Museums: do we have a role in shaping the global community?*" *Museums of Cities and Urban Futures*"; "*A Museum without Walls*"...

One presentation by Mike Houlihan described the challenge, which is one way of putting it, of representing conflict in a museum in a country, Northern Ireland, which had experienced some 30 years of armed conflict. Belfast's Ulster Museum had put on an exhibition entitled *Conflict: the Irish at War*. To quote: "The Ulster Museum was a microcosm of this world. Its staff had lived through the troubles and reflected the divisions within the city". The exhibition took on contested histories, the most difficult and contentious matter any museum can deal with, one which makes subsequent ICOM debates about defining what a museum is, or is not, seem somewhat irrelevant.

A small aside: conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere have put so many museums on the spot. How do they respond? Can they? Too many cannot, simply because they are no longer there, they have been destroyed. ICOM now has a standing committee on disaster risk management and is linked closely, as a founder member, to the Blue Shield, the organisation which was set up in 1996 in response to threats world wide to cultural heritage. Bearing witness to the impact of conflict and dealing with contested histories is an essential role for museums connected to history and to cities which bear the brunt of war and terrorism. How do we collect, why do we choose this or that artefact, or this or that story? Of course, there is no easy answer.

To go back to the conference...We had so many Russian delegates that they organised a small conference of their own. We ended with a speech by Byron Rushing of the Massachusetts House of Representatives and former President of the Museum of Afro-American History in Boston.

As at July 2006 we had 48 members.

#### **Urban Life and Museums. Museum International, No. 231 UNESCO Paris September 2006**

UNESCO had an impressive journal called *Museum International*, edited by UNESCO's Isabelle Vinson, who later became a CAMOC member. It was published in English, French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic and Chinese, so it had an international readership. Isabelle agreed to publish the proceedings and did so within a matter of weeks. That, as much as anything, made us known and unquestionably led to a surge in membership.



Joergen Selmer, Museum of Copenhagen, Otto Hochreiter, Museum of Graz. Copenhagen 2007

Before our next meeting in Vienna we had two meetings of our Executive Board: in Athens organised by our then treasurer, Anthony Voyadzis and in Copenhagen organised by Joergen Selmer, then Director of the Museum of Copenhagen. Both meetings had the objective of mapping out the future of CAMOC.

We also had a number of meetings in Moscow thanks to our Russian colleagues, Irina Smagina and Galina Vedernikova. In October 2005 it was on **Museums of Cities and Memory** which was built around the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Moscow City Museum. We had dancers from the Bolshoi and Russia's leading pop star, plus Valentin Yudashkin, Russia's leading fashion designer. Yuri Lushkov came along. A formidable political figure, he was President of the City Duma, the Mayor in other words, appointed by Boris Yeltsin. He was responsible for so much of the changing face of Moscow, including, regrettably, the rebuilding of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christ the Saviour Cathedral, an eyesore destroyed by Stalin. The site was later made into a swimming pool where many of our Russian colleagues learned to swim.

In October 2006 **Urban life represented in city museums of the 21<sup>st</sup> century**, with presentations from Alma-Ata in Khazakstan, Yamal-Nenets in Siberia, Irkutsk...places off the beaten track, but just as worthy as those in the mainstream of world attention.

In October 2007 **Museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: new projects.** That one included a presentation by the architect Yuri Platonov on his proposals to convert a beautiful early 19<sup>th</sup> century former army warehouse into the new home of Moscow's city museum.



Moscow City Museum in traffic heavy Moscow, but right by the Culture Park metro station. A great location.



Ten years on: at the end of our conference in Shanghai



## Vienna



Vienna 2017: City Museums and City Development

Our next conference in Vienna was part of the triennial ICOM conference. This time the theme was *City Museums and City Development*. It was a near disaster as I nearly forgot to book a conference room for us - as it was also ICOM's triennial, I assumed ICOM would book one for us. Not so.

We aimed to answer these questions:

What part can a museum about a city play in city development and what can its contribution be to improving the urban condition? Why is contemporary history so difficult for a museum and why do we have problems in bringing our stories up to date?

So: What examples are there of innovative projects which represent and reflect on the problems and possibilities of the contemporary and future city? How successful are they? What is their impact? What impact has the intangible heritage - oral history, social practices, customs, skills, knowledge - had on the work of museums of cities?

We entered into a contract with the AltaMira Press, USA to publish a book, our first, based on the proceedings of our conference. *City Museums and City Development* appeared in 2008. The book suffered from an uninspiring design which could only attract the dedicated, hardly the casual reader. The contents were of varying quality, but it did get good reviews, one from the great Joseph Rykwert, author of *The Seduction of Place: the City in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. He wrote: "Cities need museums as people need memories: not as repositories of their past, but as a token of their identity and a guide to the future...here is a unique survey of city museums..." Tim Mason, well known to ICOM members, wrote in the London based *Museums Journal*: "Deftly edited, it's a far more compelling book than others of its kind..." He did think though that we were "perhaps optimistic." A fair point - it's best to be realistic as to what can or cannot be achieved.

The Vienna conference was also notable for electing a new Board. Members included Chet Orloff from Portland, Oregon, USA and Suay Aksoy from Istanbul. Chet later gained a project award from ICOM to set up a linked web site about cities which would be based at Portland State University. Suay went on to become Chair of ICOM's Advisory Committee and then President of ICOM - with a letter of congratulation from the President of France.



The venue in Rio de Janeiro for our 2013 conference, part of ICOM's triennial meeting. Christian de Portzamparc architect. © Nelson Viera. The theme: Museums (Memory + Creativity) = Social Change



Mexico City 2017: Museums of Cities and Contested Urban Histories

In 2007 we received our first performance award from ICOM. It is given to committees whose performance is considered to be exceptional and this was the first year of the scheme. Then performance was reviewed by the International Committee on Committees, now that's called SAREC.

CAMOC began increasingly to talk of itself as a network and encouraged collaboration between committees. Around that time we met up with Guy Wilson, the Chair of ICOMAM (Arms and Military History), then one of ICOM's most successful committees, to explore the possibility of a joint seminar or conference. We discussed possible topics: recording and interpreting a city's experience of war and terrorism; commemorating war in cities – triumphal arches, monuments...; the impact of war and unrest on city planning and design; city people and the defence on the city... We tentatively agreed to a seminar in St Petersburg, the former Leningrad with its terrible siege in the second world war and therefore a perfect location. It all collapsed as the date chosen by our host coincided with a world economic forum and accommodation was impossible, unless our delegates were prepared to travel daily from Helsinki or somewhere in the Russian hinterland.





Seoul 2008, our first conference in Asia: City Museums and the Future of the City

We also at the time made contact with \*UN-Habitat, the Council of European Urbanism and the Cities Programme at the London School of Economics.

\* UN-Habitat is the United Nations programme which “works in over 90 countries to promote transformative change in cities and human settlements through knowledge, policy advice, technical assistance and collaborative action”.



Berlin 2011: Participative Strategies. Hugh Maguire, Dublin, Jette Sandahl, Museum of Copenhagen. Behind, Suay Aksoy, our former Chair and former President of ICOM





Chet Orloff at our Istanbul conference: Collecting Urban History in the Electronic Age

It's pointless and tedious to discuss all the conferences we've held, from Seoul to Mexico City, to Moscow and Rio: there is an account of each on our web site. We have aimed to reflect ICOM's great asset – it has no national boundaries. Both our membership and the location of our meetings must therefore reflect our international nature. It is not always easy, as so much depends on finding people who can host us. So often that is to do with money. It's a challenge which has to be met.



Shanghai 2010: Better City, Better Life

Organising an international conference though is an annual ICOM ritual. It's a tough business, and its value has been raised frequently by ICOM members: does the benefit justify the effort put into organising one? Maybe not, except that a conference brings people from countries across the world together to exchange ideas and practice, and simply to get to know each other. Even so, we come up with the eternal ICOM problem: money. It has to be a major reason why ICOM membership is skewed towards Europe and North America, in spite of efforts to provide a level playing field, and equal opportunities. Grants are awarded to young members, especially from the less rich countries, those in ICOM's categories three and four. They are the future of ICOM, but neither ICOM nor CAMOC has sufficient funds to support everyone. No-one yet has succeeded in solving the problem of creating a truly international organisation, though ICOM like the UN and UNESCO has made every effort to represent the world at large. Eliminate poverty, bigotry and war and we might get there one day.

## Десять лет спустя в Москве | Ten years later in Moscow



A bar of chocolate to celebrate our anniversary. Красный Октябрь/Red October chocolate was made in a Moscow factory, now gone from central Moscow. The Director of the factory museum was one of the first to join CAMOC.

There is one other conference we should mention – our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Moscow, organised by Irina Smagina, who organised our first meeting in 2005. Our theme this time was Memory and Migration, the City and its Museum. Above all, it was a time for reflection on our work over the previous ten years, but nostalgia has its limits, so we went forward and looked at the impact of migration on cities, the memories that migrants carry with them of a life left behind, cultural and social inclusion, and ways in which city museums have responded, and can respond, to the current world-wide migration crisis.



A graphic illustration of our first ten years devised by the Museum of Moscow

Our colleagues also produced a booklet with an introduction by Vladimir Tolstoy, President of ICOM Russia and Advisor to the President of the Russian Federation – and great great grandson of Leo, plus statements by colleagues and items on our conferences over the years. We had a variety of excursions, and as an integral part of our programme, a visit to the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Centre.

Beyond the annual conferences, we have had a string of seminars and some of us, as CAMOC members, were invited to take part in projects outside of CAMOC, but related to our work.

## **Some other activities**

### **Volos, Greece April 2006**

Volos is a small seaport in Thessaly, at a midway point on the Greek mainland facing Turkey. It is the birthplace of the painter Giorgio de Chirico and the musician Vangelis. At the time the municipality was developing a project to create the Volos City Museum whose aim would be to tell the story of the city and its people. It would be part of a much larger programme of urban and neighbourhood regeneration which was already underway and supported by the European Union. The proposed City Museum would be located in a large former industrial warehouse in one of the oldest parts of the city and thus would also help regenerate this particular area. Regeneration through culture is something so many cities have tried – building a new theatre, or concert hall, supporting artists, building design studios or community centres, all to help revive a run down district or a whole city suffering from industrial decline. There are failures, or projects with limited impact, and then there are success stories like Bilbao's in Spain's Basque country via the Frank Gehry designed Guggenheim Museum in 1997. One of the driving forces behind this project was Marlen Moulou, an associate lecturer in museum studies at the University of Thessaly.

To advance the project a workshop was held in Volos on 31-2 April 2006. A group of us went along and made presentations, all about ideas, experiences and proposals. That word 'workshop' has been misused over the years. No longer a place for repairing a car, or doing something useful with your hands, but a talking shop. At least this workshop led to a tangible and worthwhile result: the Museum is now up and running.

That workshop leads on to the argument as to whether a museum should be an active agent for social change, when there are other organisations better suited to do so. There is force in the poet's line – *They also serve who only stand and wait*, in that a museum about a city, about the urban condition, can help transform the lives of individuals and society just by bearing witness to the ills around us. By bearing witness it can draw attention and instigate action, and not just stand by and do nothing. Bearing witness is not passive, it is action and action is action whether by a museum or by ICOM or any other organisation – a government, UNESCO or the UN. Passing by on the other side is not an option. And of course a city museum, a museum free from government control as it should be, can help individuals shape the place they live in.

### **Museu de Cidade, Aveiro Portugal May 2007**

Aveiro is a small town and seaport facing the Atlantic and a short distance to the south of Porto. A group of people led by, among others, a physicist at the University of Aveiro, Manuel Thomaz, proposed setting up a museum about the city. We got in touch. Later, in May 2007, Manuel and his colleagues organised a two day workshop to explore what could be done. Among those invited were Tiina Merisalo, the Director of Helsinki City Museum, Renée Kistemaker, and myself. Earlier I had got to know Dominique Alba, then Director of the Arsenal in Paris. I encouraged her to join us. It was a successful meeting and showed what could be done at the grass roots by determined citizens. It also pointed to one opportunity for CAMOC - to move from theory to practice: to help create a city museum. It also pointed to the virtues of a citizen lead project, rather than one instigated from the top.

### **Kazan, Tatarstan 5-11 June 2008**

Kazan is worth singling out. With a population of over a million it is the capital of The Russian Federation republic of Tatarstan. Almost half the population is ethnic Tatar and is a mix of Muslims and Christians who manage to live together in harmony. It is the sort of set up which should be irresistible to a committee that aims to reflect diversity. It was the venue for a meeting of our Board, and was organised by Gulchachak Nazipova, the Director of the National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan and an active member of our committee. We opened up discussion with our Tatar colleagues on a wide range of items to do with museums about cities. It was a meeting that could have been held anywhere. It could have been tacked on to the annual ICOM meetings in Paris. That would not have been the same. An international committee simply has to be international.





Bolgar on the Volga in Tatarstan. The Orthodox Cathedral and the Mosque next to each other. An object lesson for the Taliban.

Tatarstan is not in the mainstream. Nor are Nicaragua, Botswana, Malawi, New Zealand, Paraguay or Mongolia. They are small countries, but people live, work and die in them. They matter as much as the USA or China. Add them all together and you get a large slice of the world's population and a large slice of ideas and imagination.

## What else?

### 1. A Journal



Early on we realised that we needed a journal with a reputation, or at the very least a newsletter. We started modestly with a newsletter, then a more professional version, CAMOC News which doubled as a journal. In December 2016 it became the CAMOC Museums of Cities Review, a journal with an ISSN number which could gain an international reputation through quality and intellectual rigour. Soon it was on its way to achieving that ambition by providing articles of depth and quality, well beyond mere description – my museum does this or that – or a conference report. As of 2019, it is edited by Jelena Savić, CAMOC’s secretary.

### 2. A Virtual Museum

In 2009, our colleague Chet Orloff, a professor of urban studies and planning at Portland State University, Oregon USA came up with the idea of a virtual museum of cities.

The idea behind the project was to complement and enhance existing approaches by museums of cities. It would juxtapose the public experience of the city with the museum’s traditional emphasis on curatorial expertise and scholarship., and do so digitally.

We may live in the urban age, but we also live in the digital age, an inescapable fact which has changed our means of communication beyond recognition from Twitter to Facebook and beyond. The average smart phone has more power than all the computers which took man to the moon combined. You can’t ignore that. So, the project was digital.

We made an application for support to ICOM and we were awarded a grant of €2,000, plus a note from the Director General congratulating us on the quality of our application. The aims of the project were straightforward:

1. To create a web site and database which presented electronic exhibits about cities, drawing upon the expertise of museums about them;
2. To facilitate the creation and sharing of exhibits among CAMOC members and museums about cities worldwide;

3. To help us understand cities, how they came to be, what they are today and what they might be tomorrow.

The project was linked to the Portland State University's Multimedia Design Programme and the Senior Capstone Programme. The creation of the virtual museum would be a specific course within its Capstone Programme - and that was one great attraction. CAMOC would have a base in a university with students developing content for the virtual museum. That was an attractive prospect.

CAMOC also put in €2,000 itself. So fine, we could get started. Then, one of our members objected to the project and was backed by another member. It's a long and bitter story, but in the end we returned our grant to ICOM, as if we had no alternative. I should not have agreed and should have faced down our two colleagues who had no support. In spite of it all, Chet put in his own money and the highly informative web site was up and running before long. The site is now undergoing revision and we hope to resume normal service. Our two members who objected left the committee shortly after.

### **3. CAMOC's web site and social media**

The current web site, provided by ICOM for all international committees, is kept up to date on an almost daily basis. It describes what we do, and all our past activities, including summaries of our conferences, plus back numbers of newsletters and the Journal. We have accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. We also have an extensive reading list of books and articles on cities and on city museums, which we are transferring from our old site. The list is skewed towards the West and the English language, something we are trying to rectify. We provide links to a string of other organisations in the field, some well known, others less so, but valuable as sources of information and contacts.

The only downside is that the old admirable format given to us by ICOM has been changed to a less convenient and visually imperfect one which is not easy to manage.

### **4. Migration: Cities | (im)migration and arrival cities**



Migration was the subject of a dedicated session at ICOM's triennial conference in Milan in 2016

The number of international migrants globally reached an estimated 272 million in 2019, an increase of 51 million since 2010. Currently, international migrants comprise 3.5 per cent of the global population, compared to 2.8 per cent in the year 2000, according to new estimates released by the United Nations today. UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), New York 17 September 2019



CAMOC should be concerned with every aspect of the city and its people. Migration is one of them. It has created our cities: for so many thousands of years we have moved from the countryside to the city, from the rural to the urban life. Yet, over the last few years migration has risen rapidly up the political agenda – especially now with the collapse of Afghanistan. Migration from countries torn apart by conflict, like Afghanistan, brings with it a host of inevitable problems of integration. It can lead to the creation of extreme political parties, to resentment, polarisation and exclusion in a host town or city, or it can lead to enrichment and the creation of new cultural resources which can contribute to the vitality and diversity of cities: for every minus, there is a plus which is worth having.

How are cities and citizens adjusting to this increasing diversity? CAMOC, lead by Marlen Mouliou in partnership with the Commonwealth Association of Museums (CAM) and the International Committee for Regional Museums (ICR) and with support from ICOM set out to explore the roles museums can have in collecting, presenting and collaborating in these processes through their joint project Migration:Cities |(im)migration and arrival cities.

Through the initiative of Marlen we have had workshops dedicated to examining the impact of migration on cities:

#### **Glasgow 26-27 November 2015**



This workshop, organised by the Open Museum in Glasgow, took place at the Riverside Museum, the winner of the European Museum of the Year award in 2013. It was held in collaboration with the Maryhill Integration Network, a community centre working with migrants and refugees in the city.

#### **Athens 6-7 February 2017**

This workshop involved members of CAMOC, CAM, and ICR and other participants exchanging experiences in one of the current epicentres of the migrant crisis in Europe. The intention was to learn from experiences that are real and happening, and examine them from three angles: museums, concerned citizens/organisations, and above all the immigrants themselves.

#### **Mexico City 30-31 October 2017**

The theme of our annual conference in Mexico City was: Museums of Cities and Contested Urban Histories. Migration cannot be divorced from contested histories, so earlier, on 28 October we held a migration workshop. A paper by Marlen Mouliou addressed contemporary human flows in “transitional” cities like Athens, and how we can understand the everyday reality of new kinds of urban phenomena like “refugee camps” or self-organised housing projects for homeless refugees.

Marlen later spoke about migration at the ICOM triennial conference in Milan in 2016. That particular session included a remarkable contribution from the Mayor of Lampedusa who had to deal with migration in reality, on the ground.

The matter of migration illustrates that museums cannot always stand by. They can respond to an international problem in their own way. It is better than doing nothing.

## 5. A workshop in Lisbon 3-4 May 2019

Two themes stood out: The Right to the City and Culture and Local Development

This is one quote which set the scene for the first theme:

The right to the city is...the right of all inhabitants present and future, to occupy, use and produce just, inclusive and sustainable cities defined as a common good essential to the quality of life.

The Right to the City and Cities for All, UN Habitat III Policy Papers, UN New York 2016.

Then the second theme, culture and local development:

The OECD (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and ICOM have produced a document entitled Culture and Local Development: Maximising the Impact, Guide for Local Governments, Communities, and Museums, OECD Paris 2018. To quote:

“ Museums and cultural heritage sites are powerful assets for local development...they can inspire creativity, boost cultural activity, help regenerate local economies...they can contribute to social cohesion, civic engagement, health and well-being.”

The final version was presented to ICOM's triennial meeting in Kyoto in September 2019.

It was introduced to us by Ekaterina Travkina who leads the project at the OECD, along with Alessandra Proto of the OECD Trento Centre in Italy. On the ICOM side the project is co-ordinated by Afşin Altayli, ICOM's Museums and Society co-ordinator and a former secretary of CAMOC. CAMOC's own contribution to the project has been made by our Chair, Joana Monteiro. Key into Cultural and Creative Sectors and Local Development at [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

We also had a presentation on the perennial unresolved ICOM topic – Museum definition.



Diversity in the city - or not. After the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, January 2015. Reproduced from Le Monde,

## 6. Cities in Conflict



Kabul, a city in conflict and in despair, yet again. © BBC



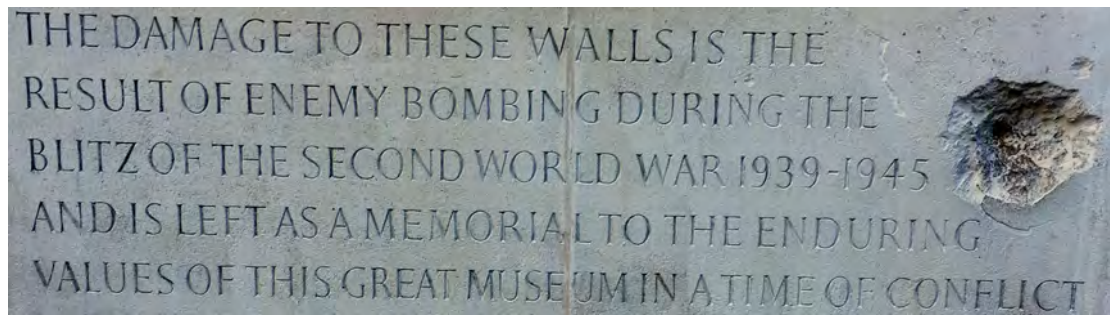
Moscow 1941. Courtesy Moscow City Museum

So much of migration is a consequence of our second big theme: conflict and its impact on cities. It's a consequence of contested histories, the theme for our conference in Mexico City, a consequence of ideology, religion, poverty. But what does talking achieve, or what can a museum do if it has no means of defending its city? No museum has an AK47.

None of us, though, is completely without power. At one stage we proposed helping to rebuild the Museum of Donetsk in Ukraine which had been destroyed in the conflict there, and even the city itself which had been badly damaged. Donetsk had been founded by a Welsh industrialist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An archive in Wales contains over 1,000 artefacts relating to Donetsk. We contacted ICOM Ukraine, and met the Minister responsible, but Russian forces and their allies effectively took over and it became pointless taking matters further. The Museum has been re-created, but in a manner and run in a way, neither CAMOC nor ICOM could find acceptable. Still, it shows what can be done: making a practical contribution to improving the urban condition. Even failure does not mean you give up.



This badly damaged museum did not give up.



At the Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Khaled al-Assad did not give up either. The former head of antiquities for the ancient and once wealthy city of Palmyra was responsible for giving Palmyra UNESCO World Heritage status. In May 2015 the modern city of Tadmur and the adjoining Palmyra were taken over by ISIS. He was killed in August 2015 for refusing to reveal to ISIS the location of artefacts he had helped to hide. © BBC



Defaced posters of women in Kabul following the takeover by the Taliban, August 2021 © Getty images

## Finally, the future

Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga com'è bisogna che tutto cambi.

If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.

Tancredi Falconeri in *The Leopard* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

I could not put it better than Tancredi. It applies to every organisation on the planet. Change is just about the only constant thing we have.

So much time and effort has been spent by members of ICOM in trying to define or re-define what a museum is, or should be. When ICOM was set up in 1945, the world had a different set of priorities and the internet was for fiction, but museums are still there to make a difference, however we care to define them. They can help change things for the better (and there is always something better) and do so in their own way.

While the debate goes on about what a museum is or is not, CAMOC can only go back to Voltaire: *Il faut cultiver notre jardin*. We must cultivate our own garden - get on with it, in our own way. We are there to make a difference, a difference, we hope, for the better. Let's not be over optimistic as to what a museum, or CAMOC itself can achieve - but even a small difference to life in cities is worth doing.

Cultivating our garden of course does not mean we go it alone, so to what extent can we contribute to the work of other organisations in the field? That's something to think about. Firstly the United Nations, in particular UN Habitat. It's all about "a better quality of life for all in an urbanised world." *The Value of Sustainable Urbanisation*, the *World Cities Report 2020*. Is essential reading. The next World Urban Forum (WUF11) will be held in Katowice, Poland on 26-30 June 2022. The theme will be *Transforming our Cities for a Better Urban Future*. To quote: "What kind of cities are needed to support the future of humanity? How do we envisage and reimagine the future of cities? What do we want our cities to look like?"

Then UNESCO. The Creative Cities Network is an international partnership which cultivates urban spaces as creative hubs. There are more than 25 Creative Cities in a variety of fields from literature to design and even gastronomy. UNESCO's Cities Platform was held on 25 June 2020 to discuss the future of cities: "As cities were the first to experience the pandemic and have been most impacted by its effects, their global response is setting the tone for how we move forward as a new normal takes root." Other UNESCO programmes include Inclusive and Sustainable Cities and World Heritage Cities. Urban living is high on UNESCO's agenda.



An exhibition on the possible futures of Lisbon at the Museum of Lisbon in 2018. In effect, it's the theme of the 2022 World Urban Forum in Katowice: better city = better life, and a city which is sustainable now and in the future.

We have reached, we could say, Stage One of our development. We have been to a large extent centred on Europe, though we have held conferences well outside, but we have the rest of the world, from Africa to the Middle East to Asia and South America to explore and involve. After all, cities don't recognise countries or continents – they exist everywhere.



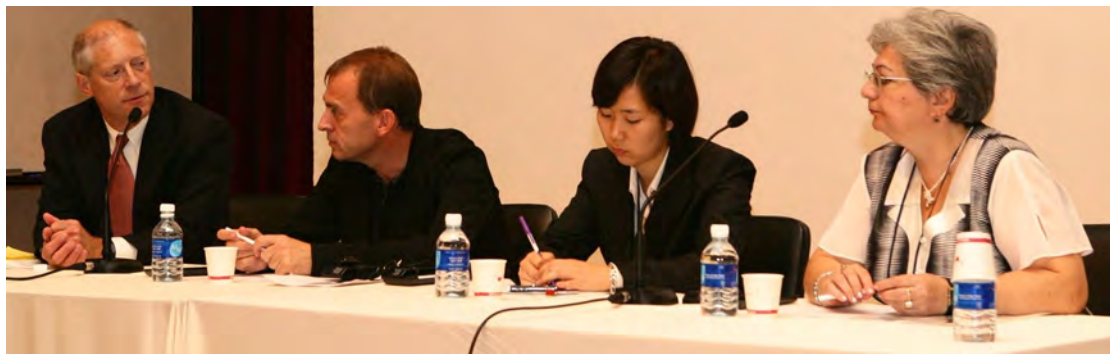
## How we are organised



Order is not necessarily a characteristic of a city

We are required to follow ICOM procedures and elect a new Executive Board and officers every three years. But we are not top heavy. Everybody has the opportunity to take part in what we do, provide us with ideas, give us their thoughts, show us different ways of doing things.

Suay Aksoy (Turkey) was elected Chair of CAMOC at our conference in Shanghai in 2010. Suay went on to be elected as President of ICOM at the 2016 ICOM triennial conference in Milan. She was succeeded by Mats Sjölin (Sweden), Marlen Mouliou (Greece) and Joanna Monteiro (Portugal). From 2010 our secretaries have been Marlen Mouliou (Greece), Layla Betti (Italy), Joana Monteiro (Portugal), Afsin Altayli (Turkey) and Jelena Savić (Portugal) who is also currently editor of our journal.



Seoul 2008

Photographs by Ian Jones unless otherwise indicate



## **A postscript: Bearing witness, which is what city museums are good at doing**

Sustainability may have become a well worn word. We talk about it increasingly, but that does not mean it's just a word politicians love to use. It's about survival, survival in a world which is warming rapidly, but it's not only about surviving climate change. A sustainable city is one which lives within its means, which has a future, is open and democratic, where there are no favelas, a city which is greener, with decent public transport, a city with, yes, a sense of its own history – that too is sustainability, a new word for an old idea.

UNESCO has 17 sustainable development goals, all about a better city and a better life for everyone. All admirable, but even achieving one world-wide is a daunting challenge. Let's take a city in Brazil: Curitiba, which has aimed to be sustainable and is widely regarded as a model of sustainability. According to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform Curitiba "has implemented several innovative systems to create jobs, improve public transportation accessibility, promote housing development, and improve waste management. The city has integrated a 'radial linear-branching pattern' to protect density by diverting traffic from the city centre and protect green areas by encouraging industrial development along radial axes." That's quite something.



Curitiba's Bus Rapid Transit system, has been used by 85% of citizens, but high fares have seen a decline in usage. @Alamy

Following on from the example of Brasilia in the 60s Curitiba's urban planners were aiming to replicate the Brasilia model with new traffic lanes and historic buildings destroyed to make way for traffic. One young person lead a revolt. As Jaime Lerner said years later "We were starting to lose our history, our identity." Later he developed a radical plan for a different Curitiba. (David Adler, The Story of Cities, The Guardian 6 May 2016).

Curitiba has become a model of urban planning to create what has been described as the greenest city on earth, with some 52 square metres of green space for every citizen. Few cities can equal that. Curitiba's Free University for the Environment is where ecological issues are taught. Curitiba's programmes Lixo que nao è lixo (Garbage that is not garbage) and Cambio verde (Green exchange – where you exchange garbage for tokens) have resulted in the vast majority of citizens recycling their waste (Tim Alley in Urban Ecologist). Curitiba also has the lowest rate of illiteracy in Brazil. The point about the Curitiba approach to city living is that the key is integration. Nothing is done in isolation, not just better transport, but tackling poverty, pollution, unemployment, crime - the ills of urban living. It has been described as integrated planning to create an inclusive city – that is, a city for everyone.

Jaime Lerner, the former Mayor has had worldwide praise for transforming his city. He also has admitted that Curitiba is not a paradise. That's the problem. Planning, especially if it is top down does not solve all problems. There is still substandard housing in Curitiba, crime

rates are high, bus and bike usage is down. As for car usage, that's seen a dramatic increase and according to at least one source in 2008 it was the highest proportion per head in Brazil. Yet, on the other hand its per capita income is 66% higher than the national average and it's now one of the greenest cities anywhere (Ronin Berzins, The Borgen Project May 2020). That's an achievement.



A greener Curitiba @Alamy

Then there's Bogotá in Colombia, another innovative city. TransitMilenio is Bogotá's bus rapid transit system. It has seen traffic fatalities down by 89% and a dramatic fall in carbon emissions (Bloomberg Citylab). Yet, in 2012 there were protests against high prices on buses, overcrowding on them (leading to sexual assaults), low frequencies, the use of diesel. Car usage is up, there is still substandard housing, crime rates are high.

Neither city is perfect. Brasília for example, the ultimate in urban planning, has a spectacular civic centre, yet has significant favelas where the poor live. Yet while Curitiba or Bogotá are far from perfect, model cities, few would wish to go back to what was there before. Both cities have become better places in which to live, and the planning of both at least suggests the will to create a better city. Doing nothing is not an option.

But is there another way, one which can complement the planning of a city? Maybe, it helps to involve citizens in the future of their city. After all, it's where they have to live. To quote UN Habitat's World Cities Report 2020: The Value of Sustainable Urbanisation:

"Support sustainable urban transformation via participatory planning...An integrated planning approach is crucial to create inclusive cities...Inclusive and participatory planning is a key lever to involve local actors in the definition, implementation and evaluation of a shared vision...[and] endow citizens with real decision-making power."

But what has this to do with a museum about a city? Such a museum can do many things, but one thing it can be good at is bearing witness. It can highlight difficult choices the city faces, setting out the options for the city now and in the future, opening up the debate, and getting citizens involved. It's democracy. A museum about a city is not a city government, it's not a city planner, it gains its strength as an independent witness, free of government control, to life in the city. It can show where the city has come from, where it is today and how it could be in the future.

In short, every city needs a museum about itself.





Cities are resilient places, which is one reason why we have museums about them.



